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Tens of thousands protest COVID-19 restrictions, vaccine requirements across Europe

Austria to enter nationwide lockdown beginning Monday to curb skyrocketing cases

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Demonstrators shout slogans and light flares during a demonstration against COVID-19 measures in Vienna,

Austria, on Nov. 20, 2021. (Erlan Schrepper/The Associated Press)

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/vienna-europe-lockdown-covid-protests-1.6256785>

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Tens of thousands of protesters, many from far-right groups, marched through Vienna on Saturday after the Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown beginning Monday to contain the country's skyrocketing coronavirus infections.

Demonstrations against virus restrictions also took place in Switzerland, Croatia, Italy, Northern Ireland and the Netherlands on Saturday, a day after Dutch police opened fire on protesters and seven people were injured in rioting that erupted in Rotterdam.

Protesters rallied against coronavirus restrictions and mandatory COVID-19 passes needed in many European countries to enter restaurants, Christmas markets or sports events, as well as mandatory vaccinations.

The Austrian lockdown will start Monday. Initially it will last for 10 days, but it could go up to 20 days, officials said. Most stores will close and cultural events will be cancelled. People will be able to leave their homes only for specific reasons, including buying groceries, going to the doctor or exercising.

The government will also make vaccinations mandatory starting Feb. 1. Not quite 66 per cent of Austria's 8.9 million people are fully vaccinated, and inoculations have plateaued at one of the lowest rates in western Europe.





Police officers stand in a circle as they check the identity of protesters during the demonstration in Vienna on Saturday. (Florian Schroetter/The Associated Press)

Saturday's march started off at Vienna's massive Heldenplatz square.

Chanting "Resistance!" and blowing whistles, protesters moved down the city's inner ring road. Many waved Austrian flags and carried signs mocking government leaders, such as Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg and Health Minister Wolfgang Mueckstein.

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Some wore doctors' scrubs, while others donned tinfoil hats. Most signs focused on the upcoming vaccine mandate: "My Body, My Choice," read one. "We're Standing Up for Our Kids!" said another.

Among those protesting were members of far-right and extreme-right parties and groups, including the far-right Freedom Party, the anti-vaccine MFG party and the extreme-right Identitarians.

About 1,300 police officers were on duty, and 35,000 protesters participated in different marches across the city, police said, adding that most didn't wear masks. Police said several protesters were detained, but specific numbers weren't provided.

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Europe sees surge in COVID-19 cases, lockdown ordered in Austria

9 months ago | 2:00

A spike in COVID-19 cases across Europe has forced some countries to reimpose restrictions. Austria will enter a nationwide lockdown for 20 days, with plans to become the first European country to mandate COVID-19 vaccinations for everyone by February.

Vaccinations in Austria have plateaued at one of the lowest rates in western Europe, and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that their intensive care units are reaching capacity. Average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks. Not quite 66 per cent of Austria's 8.9 million people are fully vaccinated.

Schallenberg apologized to all vaccinated people on Friday, saying it wasn't fair they had to suffer under the renewed lockdown restrictions when they had done everything to help contain the virus.

"I'm sorry to take this drastic step," he said on public broadcaster ORF.

Demonstrations across Europe

In neighbouring Switzerland, 2,000 people protested an upcoming referendum on whether to approve the government's COVID-19 restrictions law, claiming it was discriminatory, public broadcaster SRF reported.

A day after the Rotterdam rioting, thousands gathered on Saturday on Amsterdam's central Dam Square to protest the government's coronavirus restrictions, despite organizers calling off the protest. They walked peacefully through the city's streets, closely monitored by police.

A few hundred protesters also marched through the southern Dutch city of Breda to protest lockdown restrictions. One organizer, Joost Eras, told Dutch broadcaster NOS he didn't expect violence after consulting with police about security measures.

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Police fired shots during a violent protest against COVID-19 measures in the Dutch port city of Rotterdam on Friday night. Injuries were reported among both rioters and police, and 51 people were arrested.

"We certainly don't support what happened in Rotterdam. We were shocked by it," he told NOS.

In Italy, 3,000 turned out in the capital's Circus Maximus, a field where in ancient times Romans staged popular entertainment, to protest against "Green Pass" certificates required at workplaces, restaurants, cinemas, theatres, sports venues and gyms, as well as for long-distance train, bus or ferry travel within Italy.

"People like us never give up," read one banner, in the red, white and green colours of the Italian flag. Virtually no one at the Rome protest wore a protective mask.





A demonstrator holds a banner reading, 'No Green Pass, freedom,' during a protest against COVID-19 restrictions in Rome on Saturday. (Alessandra Tarantino/The Associated Press)

In Northern Ireland, several hundred people opposed to vaccine passports protested outside the city hall in Belfast, where the city's Christmas market opened Saturday. Proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test is required at the market.

The Northern Ireland government voted this week to introduce vaccine certificates for admission to nightclubs, bars and restaurants starting Dec. 13.

Some protesters carried signs that have been widely criticized as offensive, comparing coronavirus restrictions to the actions of Nazi Germany.

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In Croatia, thousands gathered in the capital of Zagreb, carrying Croatian flags, nationalist and religious symbols and banners against vaccination and what they described as restrictions on people's freedoms.

In France, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin on Saturday condemned violent protests in the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, one of France's overseas territories, over COVID-19 restrictions. Darmanin said 29 people had been detained by police overnight. Authorities were

sending 200 more police officers to the island and on Tuesday will impose a nightly curfew from 6 p.m. to 5 a.m.

Protesters in Guadeloupe have staged road blockades and set cars on fire. They denounce France's COVID-19 health pass that is now required to access restaurants and cafés, cultural venues, sports arenas and long-distance travel. They are also protesting France's mandatory vaccinations for health-care workers.

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